

1**Baltimore, Maryland–Present**

Liz Vargas leaned against the wall outside the locker room on the second floor of U.S. Immunological Research. Just off her left shoulder a sign read:

HOT LEVEL 4

HIGHEST LEVEL BIOCONTAINMENT

AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY

Beneath the sign, in blood red paint, was the spider-like biohazard symbol.

Liz tapped her foot and glanced at her watch. Michael was late. So what else was new? She didn't like working with Michael Ballard in HL4, but her usual partner, Jim Scully, had called in sick.

No one was allowed to work HL4 alone. No one. And since there were only five authorized people to work HL4, five people whose ID badges would open the door to the locker room, she had needed to make arrangements. The two other people authorized had been unable to partner with her today. Frank Halloran, the head of the division, was in meetings all day and couldn't get out of them. Nancy Latrelle turned her down. Liz was pretty sure Nancy would no longer be working HL4, the hot zone. They worked with the most dangerous and lethal infectious agents on the planet in HL4. Some people—most people with any degree of sanity—began to worry about working there. Any normal, intelligent human being began to worry about what one mistake, one slip of a glass pipette or a scalpel, might mean. Working with Ebola and Hanta viruses, Marburg, and others, the engineered nightmares, was not work for the squeamish. Nor was it work for the crazy. Crazy people weren't afraid. Sane people ... well, sane people feared the demons inside HL4.

But Nancy probably hadn't developed that sort of problem. What Nancy seemed to have

developed was far more common in hot zones: claustrophobia. In order to work in a hot zone—in HL4—you had to wear a biohazard suit, a spacesuit, and some people couldn't handle it. And some—like Nancy—who *could* handle it, started to lose their grip on it and began to sweat and panic inside the suit. It had happened the last three times Nancy had suited up.

Liz was pretty sure Nancy was done with Hot Level 4. So that left Michael. Who was chronically late.

She was just about ready to drop down to his office when the elevator door opened and a short, bustling man race-walked toward her down the fluorescent-lit corridor. He flung his arms up in the air when he saw her standing there. It was exactly his fast movements and nervous energy that made Michael Ballard a liability in a hot zone.

"Sorry, sorry," he said. "Angie called me and we got into it..."

Angie. The soon-to-be ex-wife. Yet another reason Liz didn't like to work with Michael. All the emotional agitation was not meant for Hot Level 4. In a hot zone you needed a cool head.

"She's starting to quibble over the boat. The boat! She didn't want me to buy it, she didn't want to go out on it, and now she wants to—"

"Michael! Are you ready for this?"

"Hey, sure, no—"

She came off the wall and stood squarely in front of him, tapping him on the chest, making sure she had his full attention.

"We have to do this," she said. "But I'm not going in there with you if you've got your undies in a bunch. Don't spend time thinking about Angie or your lawyer fees or your goddamned boat. Think about getting in and out of there without any mistakes. Pay attention."

"Hey, no problem."

Liz was an inch or two taller than Michael's five-five. She gazed into his blue eyes and saw him take a deep breath, relaxing. Centering himself. He became visibly calmer.

"Okay, sorry," he said. "You go in, get changed. I'll be ready in a few minutes."

The locker room for Hot Level 4 was uni-sex. With so few people qualified to work the space, there had been no sense putting in separate locker rooms.

"You're sure?"

He nodded and ran his left hand through his wiry brown hair. She noticed that he wasn't wearing his wedding band. She wondered if this was because he had taken it off in anticipation

of the impending divorce or because no jewelry was allowed in the hot zone. "Yeah," he said. "I'm sure. I'll be fine. Go on."

She nodded and pressed her ID badge to the reader. A green light clicked on and she pushed her way into the locker room.

Five miles away from the two-story building housing U.S. Immunological Research, three white panel vans traveled down I-695. Inside each van were four men, one driving and three in the back, waiting. They were all in contact with one another via scrambled radios. All but the drivers wore white Tyvek biohazard suits. Hanging around their necks were rubber North respirator masks with Lexan faceplates and two purple virus filters jutting out like insect mandibles. They were seven minutes out.

The locker room was tiny. It contained half a dozen metal lockers, a bench to sit on, a mirror and shelves. Liz opened a locker and stripped naked. She took off her Timex Indiglo and her earrings and a gold chain she wore around her neck and placed them on the top shelf of the locker. She twisted her diamond ring and wedding band. The diamond definitely had to go. It was impossible to wear a diamond ring under rubber gloves and the risk of the diamond cutting the thick rubber was too great. She took off both rings, her heart thudding in her chest. Her husband, Alan, had died two years before in a motorcycle accident and she still wore the rings. She hated to take off the wedding band. Usually she did, just like the rules said. But she also knew that most everybody took some sort of good luck charm into the hot zone. Level 4 pathogens did that to seemingly rock-steady people. She put the diamond ring on the shelf, but slipped the simple gold wedding band back on her finger.

Quickly she pulled on a set of green surgical scrubs. Underwear was not allowed into the hot zone. She donned a cloth surgical cap. She wore her blond hair short, partly to make this work easier, in part because she thought she looked pretty good with it short. She worked hard at keeping in shape, was still two years shy of forty and knew she could pass for a younger thirty ... not in her twenties, that wasn't possible. But thirty-two, maybe. She took a calm, steady look at herself in the mirror, then crossed to the door and knocked on it so Michael would know he could come in. She crossed the room to the opposite door and pushed it open, feeling pressure sucking at the door. Everything beyond the locker room was under negative air pressure,

designed to keep nasty germs—bugs—from floating out on the air currents. The room beyond, Level 2, was filled with blue ultraviolet light. UV light destroyed viruses and bacteria. Level 2 was a staging area into HL4.

A mile from U.S. Immunological Research, the three vans sped off the expressway onto an exit ramp, then split up, one van heading for the rear entrance, two for the main entrance. The two-story U.S. Immunological Research building was a long, low-slung concrete box with few windows. The second floor contained no windows at all. It looked industrial and uninteresting except for an unusually large numbers of air vents and stacks on the roof. It was surrounded by a largely empty parking lot, narrow grass borders populated with mature ash, oak and pine trees, and a six-foot-tall chain-link fence. The gates—one in the front and one in the rear—weren't designed to keep serious intruders out, but to provide a psychological barrier to the randomly curious. When asked, employees of U.S. Immunological Research told people they were a small biotech company trying to create new vaccines, which was essentially true. A uniformed security guard manned a booth at both entrances and employees were required to display ID and sign in with the guard before a barrier arm was raised.

The three vans were two minutes out.

Liz walked through Level 2, which consisted of a shower stall lit by UV light. There was soap and shampoo. She grabbed a pair of socks off a shelf as she passed and slipped them on, then moved into the staging area that contained a desk, sink and chair. On the desk was a roll of duct tape, which she used to tape the base of her pants to her socks, creating a seal. Then she slipped on a pair of Latex gloves and proceeded to tape the shirt sleeve to the gloves. It was a pain in the neck to use tape while wearing rubber gloves, but she managed it without tearing the gloves.

In an overgrown closet next to the desk her spacesuit hung with four others. It was the newest out from Chemtursion, a prototype, bright blue and bulky. She laid it out on the concrete floor and slithered into it. She was staggering to her feet when Michael appeared, his wrists and ankles taped. She shouldered her way into the sleeves, then pulled the face mask over her head, zipping up the zipper. Her faceplate immediately fogged up. Coiled on the wall were plastic air hoses. She unhooked one and plugged it into the suit, which immediately inflated with

pressurized air. Her faceplate cleared, but she could barely hear through the roar of the air. She watched as Michael donned his own spacesuit and hooked up to the hoses. They took turns examining each other's fittings and connections, taking the extra time to make sure there weren't any breaches in the suits. They gave each other a thumbs-up, unhooked their air hoses and proceeded to the passage leading into Hot Level 4.

It was a stainless steel airlock with nozzles built into the ceiling and walls that could spray water and bleach or Lysol for decontamination. It was called the Decon room on the technical specs, though everyone who worked HL4 called it Styx. Liz didn't know who had called it Styx first, but the name of the mythological river one crossed into the afterlife had stuck for the Decon room. Black humor, to be sure.

At the far end was another heavy metal door. Liz unlatched the door, thinking, *Welcome to Hades*, and stepped into the hot zone.

The vans' attacks were so closely coordinated that two vehicles hit the front gate at almost exactly the same time the solo van hit the rear gate. Pulling up to the gates, the side door of the vans slid open and fully geared men fired their Colt XM-177s into the guard house, the 45mm rounds immediately shredding the security guards. Roaring forward, splintering the gate arm, the vans raced to the entrances. The two vans in the front pulled to the front door and five armed men dressed in white biohazard suits exploded through the main doors. They fired their machine guns at the shocked guards at the main entrance, racing through the main corridor at a dead run, hitting the elevator in seconds. Two white-suited men stayed outside the elevator and fired at anyone who stuck their head out of their offices as his three companions rode the elevator to the second floor.

The rear van took a similar approach, only two men went in through the loading dock, emptying their weapons at anyone they saw, breaching the main building and setting up perimeters at two crossways so no one could get to the elevator.

Hot Level 4 opened into a small, concrete block room, about ten feet by sixteen. The walls were covered with metal cabinets that contained a variety of laboratory materials and were lit by UV lights. Everywhere was the red biohazard symbol. At the opposite end of the room was a long concrete corridor with rooms jutting off it. Some of those rooms contained laboratories

with microscopes and hoods and centrifuges while others contained animals—caged monkeys in three of the rooms—while yet others were autopsy suites.

Momentarily unhooked from the air supply, Liz shouted, “We need to feed the monkeys, then check the Marburg cultures. Frank said—“

Above their heads a yellow light began to strobe. There were two lights, one yellow, one red. The yellow one indicated someone was entering HL4. That was unexpected, but they had just a moment to be glad it wasn't the red strobe light. The red light indicated the negative pressure air system had been compromised and any bugs in the area might be able to get to the outside world.

Their relief was short-lived as two figures in white Tyvek biohazard suits burst into the hot zone. Both carried machine guns. One had a bulky bag slung over his shoulder.

“What the hell?” Michael stepped forward, hands held out in a STOP gesture. “Who the hell—“

The machine guns chattered. Michael flew backwards, blood spattering his blue suit. Clumsy in her spacesuit, Liz spun and began to sprint down the hallway, hoping to dive into one of the rooms. She could lock herself in. She was into the corridor when a massive impact struck her back and she was flung to the ground, slamming into the concrete block walls.

She heard the two men shouting to each other in a foreign language. She didn't move. Didn't want to bring their attention to the fact she was alive.

Alive!

She didn't know why she was alive. Her back hurt like she'd been hit with a sledgehammer, but she otherwise seemed unhurt. Her heart thundered in her chest, her breathing fogging her faceplate. *Oh God!* she thought. Don't let them see the mist on the faceplate.

Out of the corner of her eyes she saw the two figures disappear into the first room on the left, the storage room for the frozen samples of all the Level 4 pathogens. It contained refrigerators, freezers and liquid nitrogen containers.

Who were they?

She heard one of the men say something. It sounded ... Asian? She didn't know. Foreign. She tried to focus on the words. Tried to remember, but her brain wasn't working right. Her usually nimble mind seemed to be stuck in a pit of thick tar. There was a dim rumble and clatter, then a hissing sound. A moment later she heard the sound of footsteps as the figures left Hot

Level 4.

She tried to take a deep breath, but found she couldn't. When she tried to inhale, a blistering shot of pain seared across her back and shoulder blades. She was getting sleepy, her eyes barely able to open. *God*, she thought. *Maybe I am dying*. And then she realized that without an air hose hooked up, she was rapidly depleting the remaining oxygen in her suit. Staggering cautiously to her feet, she noted that the yellow strobe light had stopped, but she could hear klaxons going all throughout the building. Reaching over, she snagged an air hose and hooked it up to her spacesuit. Her suit inflated again, the roar in her ears almost a comfort. She looked down at Michael, lying still in a puddle of blood, and began to shake. Then it hit her, hit her hard, the shock, the fear ... and she crumpled to the hard floor.